

Exegeting Ohio's motto: A scriptural ruling

by [David T. Ball](#) in the [June 21, 2000](#) issue

It looks like Ohio will have to celebrate its bicentennial in 2003 without its longtime motto "With God All Things Are Possible." A federal court ruled in April that the motto is tantamount to a state endorsement of Christianity and so violates the First Amendment. The court noted that the motto "repeats, word-for-word, Jesus' answer to his disciples' questions about the ability to enter heaven and thereby achieve salvation," and therefore offers a "uniquely Christian thought not shared by Jews and Muslims."

Many Ohioans are frustrated by the decision, and wonder why "With God All Things Are Possible" is unconstitutional when "In God We Trust" appears on our coins and "one nation, under God" is part of the Pledge of Allegiance. It is not only Ohio Christians who feel this way. Mouhamed Nabih Tarazi, president of the Islamic Society of Greater Columbus, pointed out in the *Columbus Dispatch* that Muslims were not consulted when the lawsuit was filed and added, "I question whether any other religious group in this state was consulted or feels offended by the motto." The state has vowed to appeal, but whether that appeal will be heard rests with the U.S. Supreme Court.

One of the most interesting theological aspects of the motto controversy is the difference between Ohio's use of the motto and its meaning in the biblical context. Ohio maintains that the purpose of the motto is to inspire Ohioans to achieve the seemingly impossible. "It is a compelling symbol of hope, inspiration and stick-to-it-iveness," the state argued. Ohio emphasizes that the motto is used alongside secular symbols (Ohio's flower, bird, animal, fossil and song) "to signal what makes the state distinct and what gives it pride." It seems that the message that state officials hope to impress upon its citizens is roughly, "With God's help, all things are possible for Ohioans to achieve if they believe in themselves and in their abilities."

The biblical passage itself seems to have more to do with the power of God—not humanity—to achieve what appears to be impossible. The motto is taken from an exchange between Jesus and his disciples which begins when Jesus speaks of the difficulty of a rich person entering the kingdom of heaven: “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle.” The disciples, “greatly astounded,” inquire, “Then who can be saved?” Jesus replies: “For mortals it is impossible, but for God all things are possible” (New Revised Standard Version).

Note that Ohio’s version of the text differs from the NRSV version. The motto (following the old RSV, the New International Version, the New American Standard Bible and the New King James) says “with God all things are possible” rather than “for God all things are possible.” According to the *New Interpreter’s Bible* commentary on Matthew, the NRSV made the change to avoid the misinterpretation “that everything is possible with God . . . in the sense of collaboration.” In its commentary on the parallel passage in Luke, the *New Interpreter’s Bible* notes that the passage emphasizes that salvation “is not a matter of human ability but of divine power.” Ultimately, the passage’s import is not even limited to the topic of salvation. Jesus reminds the disciples in broad terms of God’s power to do all things. Ohio’s use of the motto to emphasize human potential, albeit in collaboration with God, is thus at odds with its apparent import in the biblical context.

Curiously, questions of the meaning of the biblical text were central to the appellate court’s decision. The court carefully reviewed the testimony of four witnesses regarding the meaning of the passage. The plaintiffs, the Ohio chapter of the ACLU and a Columbus Presbyterian pastor, Matthew Peterson, called two expert witnesses, one of whom was Peterson himself. These two witnesses agreed that the passage has, in Peterson’s words, “everything to do with salvation.” The state countered with two biblical experts of its own, one of whom said that the words are not uttered “in reference to salvation. They have to do with discipleship.” The state’s other biblical expert, however, conceded on cross examination that the passage is about salvation.

The court apparently viewed this 3-1 tally to constitute adequate grounds for reaching its conclusion. “To say that [Jesus’s words] describe something other than the achievement of salvation,” the court said, “is to put a premium on ignorance. . . . In sum, fairly read and understood, the State of Ohio has adopted a motto which crosses the line from evenhandedness toward all religions, to a preference for Christianity, in the form of Christian text. Thus, it is an endorsement of Christianity

by the State of Ohio,” which is unconstitutional.

Though I agree with the court that the motto is unconstitutional, I find it troubling that a federal court sought to determine the true meaning of a biblical passage. In so many words, the court has called the one dissenting witness, David Belcastro, an associate professor of religious studies at Capital University, ignorant for contending “that persons can walk away from this phrase, either in isolation or within its broader biblical context, with different meanings.” Let me add my name to his, for I think Jesus is talking more about God’s power than he is about salvation.

The court easily could have avoided dabbling in biblical interpretation. In *Jones v. Wolf* in 1978 the U.S. Supreme Court declared that courts must engage in “no consideration of doctrinal matters.” In that case, the court was able to resolve a dispute between two factions of a Presbyterian congregation by using “neutral principles of law” rather than by determining which was the “true congregation,” which “is an ecclesiastical question that cannot be answered by a civil court.”

As the Supreme Court has often done over the years in such cases, the appellate court could have considered what the state wants to accomplish with its motto and whether the state could accomplish its purpose by alternative means. In 1963 in *Abington v. Schempp*, when Pennsylvania asserted that its purpose in requiring ten Bible verses to be read to begin the school day was to instill morality, the court concluded that “readings from the speeches and messages of great Americans, for example, or from the documents of our heritage of liberty” would serve the purpose, and would be regarded as “unsatisfactory or inadequate only to the extent that the present activities do in fact serve religious goals.” And in 1987, in *Edwards v. Aguillard*, when Louisiana asserted that its purpose in forbidding the teaching of the theory of evolution in public schools unless accompanied by instruction in creation science was to foster academic freedom, the court countered, “If the Louisiana legislature’s purpose was solely to maximize the comprehensiveness and effectiveness of science instruction, it would have encouraged the teaching of all scientific theories about the origins of humankind.”

Could Ohio accomplish its goal of inspiring Ohioans by another kind of motto? One would think so. When Ohio first considered a motto in the 19th century, a superintendent of schools came up with a list of 125 suggestions (including “Virtue in circumstances of difficulty”). Any suggestions?